Books and the People Who Make Them

Wild Oats

By GEORGE GORDON.

"PEARLS before swine," said the actress as she pushed through the crowd ahead of me.

THE CRITIC'S AWFUL BIT.

C is for Caine on the chair in the Hall;
He writes, like an angel that's had a great fall,
Of Christians and Manxmen and Peters that pall.

THE FITNESS OF THINGS.

The site of the small house in Artillery Row, off Cheapside, London, where Milton completed *Paradise Lost*, drinking deep (to use a poet's metaphor) of the Pierian Spring, is now occupied by a firm of well drillers.

Mr. H. L. Mencken has been known to disguise himself behind a beard in Prince Albert, hard hat and flowing tie, that he may go sightseeing through Greenwich Village with his beerbrother, George Jean Nathan, introduced here and there as Owen Hatteras, a frequent contributor to *Smart Set*. So has a legend sprung up concerning Hatteras, and it is even whispered that he is a figment of the imagination, having no reality in fact.

One terrible result of John Cowper Powys's lectures on Rabelais, as reported to me by a bookseller's clerk, concerned the gentlest of New York's mid-Victorian spinsters and matrons who took to Pantagruel and Gargantua with such zest, insisting always upon unwashed translations, that the stock this side the pond was soon exhausted; it seems that he himself had not yet read that breviary of the unregenerate and was forced to content himself with a sadly wholesome abridgment. He has, however, a vivid imagination and supplied fresh blasphemies (culled from George Moore and Edgar Saltus) wherever he seemed to detect a deletion. I fancy his edition would not pass the censor.

Mr. Barrett H. Clark, an omnivorous reader, not daring to trust a treacherous memory, fears lest some day he may (without acknowledgment) steal the choicest of another's phrases and find himself accused of plagiarism. The fear seems constant with those who write. I find Mr. Arthur Symons topping an essay on Oscar Wilde *An Artist in Attitudes*, and years later (in *Puck*) Mr. Huneker sagely announces that "it was always attitudes with Oscar." Is this permissible?

I laughed at Mr. Clark's scruples. To the victor the spoils. It was Ben Jonson's theory that the business of authorship involved a wide acquaintance with books and "an ability [as he put it] to convert the substance and riches of another poet in one's own use." Dryden said of him that he "was not only a professed imitator of Horace, but a learned plagiary of all the others; you track him everywhere in their snow. . . . But he has done his robberies so openly that one sees he fears not to be taxed by any law. He invades authors like a monarch, and what might be theft in others is only victory in him."

The crime is not that we, all of us, steal, but the uses we make of our thievings.

However, Mr. Clark does not agree with me. He gave a case in point. He attended the premiere of Barrie's *New Word* with Clayton Hamilton. In the lobby after the curtain, four other critics listening, Mr. Hamilton said: "Who but Barrie could write a play on reticence?" using the one word applicable to that playlet. Next morning that word occurred in four separate critiques.

I insist his instance is unusual and not necessarily criminal. How many of Mr. Hamilton's readers read any one of those other reviews? We none of us think that we have originated our syntax or have a lien on any word because we first happened to discover its applicability. We are none of us (in the narrow meaning of the word) original. However, I can understand Mr. Clark's fear; I am not wholly without it.

THE Penguin series of books, which Boni & Liveright are preparing to publish, will start this fall with four titles —*Gabrielle de Bergerac*, by Henry James; *Karma*, by Lafcadio Hearn; *Japanese Fairy Tales*, by Lafcadio Hearn, and *Iolanthe's Wedding*, by Hermann Sudermann. These books will sell at $1.25 apiece; none of them will be reprints, and all will be books that have never before been published in this country. This is the feature that particularly distinguishes the books of this series from the volumes of the modern library series. Of the Henry James book the publishers say that it is perhaps the finest novel of his early period, written in simple, lucid style.

Gertrude Hall, author of *Miss Ingalis* (Century Company), was born in Boston and taken at seven to Italy. For nine years she and her sisters were boarding pupils at the young ladies' pension described in *The Truth About Camilla*. There her first stories were written. Her first book, verse, appeared in 1890; *Far From To-day*, short stories, in 1892. Then two more books of verse, two more of short stories, and then four novels, ending with *Aurora the Magnificent*. Miss Hall has also had published translations of *Chantecler*, *Cyrano de Bergerac* and some poems of Paul Verlaine.

A new book called *Luxembourg and Her Neighbors* by Ruth Putnam, author of *Alsace and Lorraine* and *William the Silent*, is being published by G. P. Putnam's Sons. You may not know that the refrain to the national song of the Luxembourgeois contains the line: "Prussians we will never be."

TO THE EDITOR OF BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD—*Sir:* I picked up a copy of *Books and the Book World* the other day and read a review of *The Ghost Garden*, by Amelie Rives. And as I laid it down I announced to my assembled family (who, I must admit, did not seem at all thrilled by the announcement) that that was my idea of a good review. It is the sort of review that gives you pleasure from beginning to end, that makes you think, and that makes you determine to buy the book.

It used to be considered a triumph of the critic's art to condemn and yet, in the very act of condemning, to make one curious to read the book condemned. But this reviewer—who lives on West Eighty-first street and cannot afford to go to the country and has to manufacture his own local color as best he can—goes further still. Without any exaggerated or sensational condemnation, holding the balance quite even and nicely distributing praise and blame, he yet draws you on irresistibly to buy not one book but two—not alone *The Ghost Garden* but also *The Quick or the Dead*.

He has said what he has to say without fear or favor; he has kept the critic's ermine (or whatever fur the critic wears) perfectly clean; he has steered his bark cleverly enough between the Scylla, on the one side, of fooling the all too gullible public, and, on the other, the Charybdis of hurting the feelings and hindering the sales of an all too sensitive authoress. But that is not all. He has drawn pictures—he has created an atmosphere—he has awakened memories, and all this apropos of one little book. Truly "in reviewing as in art, the subject is nothing; the treatment is everything."

And my favorite style of literary treatment—if I may be allowed to mention it—is that advocated and used by Anatole France to describe everything *with reference to yourself;* not to mete out justice from some Olympian height, not to pretend to strict impartiality (always the shallowest of pretences, for what "living, breathing, thinking man" ever can be impartial?), but to look at everything in the light of your own experience, to judge of everything as it affects *you*.

Standards, of course, we must have. But the true critic conforms to certain standards as naturally and as unconsciously as we ordinary mortals conform to the law of gravitation. And so what I like best of all about this review is that the reviewer has gone back into his own experience and has called up "the ghost of 1888." He has done it so well that the ghost seems almost alive—no pale, impersonal wraith of vanished days, but as hale and hearty and familiar as Santa Claus himself.

I, too, have lived in 1888, in Indian summer, in a town of the middle West, and while I never knew the Smiths, and never inhabited a house exactly like theirs, I recognize the picture as absolutely true to life. It takes me back to the days of my girlhood, and I can feel again the tight sleeves that bound my arms and the narrow velvet bonnet strings that encircled my youthful chin. I can remember the games we played and the books we read and the great commotion caused by the startling heroine of *John Ward, Preacher*. (By the way, I know a very interesting story about that book.)

But alas! I must confess that I never read *The Quick or the Dead*. And would you know the reason why? Because I lived in a Scotch Presbyterian family where *Saracinesca*, or *Only a Governess*, or even *John Ward, Preacher*, would never have been opened on the Sabbath day. Our literature on Sunday beyond the Bible and the Shorter Catechism was confined to the memoirs of very pious people, St. Louis, Mme. Guyon, Charles Wesley, Mr. Hare, et al., for the most part bound in excellent black bindings and in very bad print. Bossuet's *Funeral Orations* were regarded with suspicion because they were in French, and though I was forced to study Butler's *Analogy* at school I was never allowed to look at it on Sunday because that would be doing unnecessary work. I remember my father asking me if I wanted to read it because I loved it. I could not tell a lie. Nobody *could* love Butler's *Analogy*. If I did not love it and long to read it then it was only a task and must be postponed to a weekday. That seemed to me to cap the climax of strict Sabbatarianism.

But even on a weekday *The Quick or the Dead* would never have been tolerated. I was not allowed to read any works of any kind except Dickens and Thackeray. Even *Villette* was snatched away from me just as I was luxuriating in that most charming of all beginnings, the arrival of Paulina and her introduction to Lucy Snowe and the Bretton family. It was years after that before I saw the book again. Is that perhaps one of the reasons why *Villette* is my very favorite novel to this day—not to me the finest, or the greatest, or the most artistic, but the *favorite?* There is always a charm about the things that "we have loved long since and lost a while," and *Villette* is no exception to the rule.

Of course I heard people discussing *The Quick or the Dead*, and of course I was wildly curious to see this shocking book. But I never did. Gradually "the tasks of real life" crowded out the long leisurely hours of reading that I used to have. "Some things never come back, and youth is one of them." It is impossible to feel the same vivid curiosity about *The Quick or the Dead* that I felt thirty long years ago. I doubt if any novel of Amelie Rives could stir my blood or chill my marrow now. And, of course, what was very outspoken and very shocking thirty years ago will be "dull as grammar on the eve of holiday, in this age of blatant revelation and deliberate indecency. The very fact that I may go and buy the book and read it openly wherever and whenever I choose takes away half the charm. And yet, as I read what the "middle aged reviewer" has to say about "that furious little work of the lost year '88," some faint, far, elderly phantom of my youthful longing comes back to me, and I determine not to give sleep to mine eyes or slumber to mine eyelids until I have found and read *The Quick or the Dead*. E. C. MCKNIGHT.

SEWICKLEY, Pa.

Of special interest just now because of the increased merchant marine and greater navy is a little book, *Knots*, published by the *Rudder*, the yachtsman's magazine. The author, Arthur F. Aldridge, formerly was yachting editor of THE SUN. Extra chapters on cordage, matting, hammock making and wire steel work make *Knots* valuable to all who go down to the sea in ships.

The George H. Doran Company will publish a volume of Joyce Kilmer's writings in which will be embodied all the poems of Kilmer's that are likely to be remembered and several war poems written in France. The book will also contain essays and letters by Kilmer, portraits and a memoir which Robert Cortes Holliday, Kilmer's friend and literary executor, is now at work upon.